

APPRAISING CHURCH LEADERS TODAY

By John Durrant

The primary aim of the appraisal of ministers should be to increase the quality of mission of the church through developing of the potential of each minister; it should seek to recognise the specialised needs of individual ministers.

Context

It has been suggested that the product determines the purpose: if the product is an action plan for development the appraisal interview will become a staff development interview, but if the product is an agreed appraisal of a minister's performance for insertion by a church secretary/warden into his/her file, staff development purposes will be in the background. I have prepared this article in the light of the advantages of the former framework!

An appraisal system should relate to systematically assessed needs and priorities which are set within balanced and coherent overall plans. To understand the needs of the individual and the church, a vision is required of how things might improve in the future. This demands a strategic, corporate and longer term view from the leadership team which may override the shorter-term wants of an individual minister. It involves careful discussion, commitment from all involved and consensus where the views of the minister and the leadership team may not coincide. The minister's appraisal should not, therefore, be conducted in isolation.

An informal process of continuous review is essential in order to provide feedback on performance: at the same time this should encourage the minister to practise self-appraisal. I suggest that the formal aspects of review should, if possible, be established only after the informal system has succeeded in creating a positive climate. This approach can assist members of the leadership team in coming to impartial views, without damaging relationships between themselves and the minister. It will also simplify the task of meeting the formal requirements of an annual review. An added advantage of the ongoing self-appraisal system is that the leadership team will receive comment on its behaviour and

approach. The minister's comments can provide valuable feedback on the way in which the leadership team functions.

The performances of ministers, as of any other employees, can be more variable even than antiquated heating systems in some churches! Over time, they may improve or deteriorate. People learn by experience, and even if no positive action is taken to help church staff improve, most will raise their performance levels as they become more knowledgeable and discover for themselves ways of getting their jobs done more efficiently. However, leaving performance improvement to chance has at least four shortcomings:

- the minister may eventually reach an acceptable standard but will take far longer to do so than if positive developmental action is taken;
- the standard which becomes the norm may be well below that which could be achieved;
- the response of the minister to changes in the church's needs may be very slow;
- the performance of the minister may deteriorate as he/she loses interest or fails to adjust to changing circumstances.

Positive action to raise and maintain the standards of performance of the minister in his/her present job, and to develop the qualities required for the future, is a vital task for the leadership team. It is only when the team begins to assess performance in a consistent way that a full picture of the minister's strengths and weaknesses can become clear. It will then be possible for a programme of developmental action to be planned.

The subject, however, is not one-sided. The minister also has an interest in attaining high standards, because of the personal satisfaction to be gained from work well done. His or her involvement is also of critical importance in securing commitment to subsequent action. So the development of the minister must be seen as a joint process in which leadership team and minister work together.

In deciding how to approach appraisal systematically, there are three main considerations:

- whether to place the emphasis on the setting and achievement of specific tasks; or on the definition of general standards;
- whether to emphasise the improvement of performance: or the identification of training needs;
- the degree of formality or administrative detail of the scheme.

The setting of objectives or standards is one primarily of emphasis. It is possible to combine these approaches, or to use one for one type of job and the other for different work. Many objective-related schemes also lean towards quantifiable targets. Some targets may be susceptible to objective assessment while subjective assessment may be appropriate to others.

It is possible to be systematic about appraisal without using forms - these are best seen as a helpful aid rather than an end in themselves. Forms are normally used to standardise the way in which appraisal is conducted and recorded; in the church context they would usually be signed by the minister and the member of the leadership team who is chairing the appraisal; and a copy would be given to the church secretary/warden or equivalent.

Reasons

A successful structured review programme should provide the church with a questioning approach to the work of the minister, a greater analysis of strengths and weaknesses (and a desire to remedy the latter), receptivity to new ideas and a willingness to explore different approaches. It is likely that the minister will be prepared to be critical of him/herself and share his/her knowledge, skills and experience with other members of the church. In a context where there is a team ministry, ministers should be enabled to offer an increased level of professional support to each other - indeed they will probably achieve a higher level of professionalism.

Staff development and appraisal will not solve all the problems found in churches. They can, however, provide a systematic framework for ensuring that difficulties are registered and appropriate action implemented to try to overcome weaknesses, support strengths and encourage potential.

The appraisal process can help a church to ensure that the minister's development does not take place by chance, but within an ethos/climate in which minister and leadership team collaborate to solve the problems of improving the mission of the church.

A two-way exchange of ideas and the consistency of looking ahead and building on achievements to develop the church's mission will be important factors in the success of any appraisal scheme. It must be objective, open, focused on the job, operationally simple, systematic and developmental.

Value

Within the church context performance appraisal has two purposes:

1. to provide a means for the leadership team to improve the performance of the minister by way of individual support and guidance;
2. to obtain and share information, from which may come:
 - plans for meeting needs in the present job;
 - opportunities for further service.

The first is all too often neglected: it is hard to do, and easy to avoid. The system alone is not enough - skill is needed to make it work. If the appraisal system is directed towards improving the performance of the minister it should improve the functioning of the church as a whole. This is why the appraisal interview is crucial to the system. Constructive discussion about how the minister is going about his/her job can be helpful to him/her, and revealing to the leadership team, bringing out information on which to base actions which will help the minister continue to do a good job or to improve; appraisal is a means of speeding up learning. The crucial aspect of performance improvement is to diagnose what needs to be improved next to add to the capacity of an individual. Used in this way appraisal becomes an active and constructive pursuit. The passive 'reporting' of past events which occurs with the adoption of a systems-driven approach gives the minister no chance to learn how he/she can improve or develop.

Process

I believe that industrial and commercial appraisal schemes can be adapted to meet the needs of churches. There are basic similarities, such as regular meetings between the leadership team and minister; an agreed and negotiated job description; an agreed standard of performance; agreed targets for the forthcoming period which are realistic, relevant, attainable and objective; regular reviews; evaluation of performance; and regular training opportunities.

In general the appraisal process consists of:

- sharing information - is what we believe to be true, really true?
- diagnosing the next step necessary to increase capacity and/or inclination;
- showing and gaining commitment - this cannot be demanded, it must be earned, and it is much more likely to be earned if appraisees are encouraged to make the diagnosis and suggest improvement themselves;
- definite action - as distinct from intention;
- reporting to the church;
- monitoring to see what action takes place.

The formal system needs a careful structure, and a clear framework which can be broken down into distinct phases: preparation, observation, the interview and evaluation. As working relationships develop between the minister and the leadership team, further knowledge and understanding will be gained. Pure objectivity is likely to be unattainable and self-awareness will always be clouded by self-perception. To achieve some objectivity, however, the system must, as I have already emphasised, be closely related to the aims and overall objectives of the church.

All those undergoing appraisal will need to be well briefed about the purpose of the activity and about the processes to be used. It is important to involve the minister in the development of the framework rather than simply imposing it upon him/her.

Both appraisers and minister will need to undertake some preparatory activities such as gathering up-to-date information and setting the agenda. It would be interesting and illuminating

for the appraisers to observe the minister at work. Although much of the minister's role is clearly public, there are other areas about which information would be helpful.

The minister should have a copy of evidence such as current job description and the objectives set for the year just ending. Consultation between the minister and the appraisers prior to the interview is essential to ensure that both are aware of what is to be discussed, but the agenda must not be too prescriptive. It must allow for a range of circumstances. A specific agenda should include all important matters for discussion; in other words the agenda must include items which the appraisee and the appraisers want to talk about.

At the heart of all good schemes is an in-depth discussion (usually annual) between the leadership team and the minister about how the job is being done, which should take place in a climate which facilitates genuine dialogue. I wish to stress the importance of careful preparation; an informal atmosphere should be created where praise is used and where the minister does at least half of the talking. It will also be important to face up to problems through self-appraisal; a discussion of performance within defined areas of activity (not personality) is essential; the discussion should be positive; no surprises should be introduced. Attention should be focused on past successes and available evidence should be used to indicate areas for improvement and ways in which this might be achieved. The emphasis should be on helping the minister to consider his/her own position, defining his/her own problems and discovering, through discussion, his/her own practical solutions. The appraisers need to question whether the minister can interpret his/her own observations.

The interview will also look to the future with an agreement on working to a clear structure, focusing on facts and agreeing measurable targets. A respected appraisal scheme and a well conducted interview can serve to reinforce the informal positive messages which the minister receives; this in itself is a form of reward and a source of further motivation. Whatever the outcomes of appraisal, the minister will probably express satisfaction with the time of exclusive and uninterrupted discussion with the appraisers afforded by the appraisal interview. He or she will also usually value the opportunity afforded by the formal appraisal interview for feedback and communication about his/her work

from someone who has credibility and who has the ability to bring about changes. At the end of the interview, an agreed statement should be prepared setting out the action to be taken by both parties by an agreed date, and concluding on a high note. Targets should be specific and realistic - thus success should build on success.

Once individual needs have been identified, the means of satisfying them must be found. In order to ensure the process does not degenerate into a paper exercise, the effectiveness of the system should be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis. Appraisers should be analytical both about their own performance and about the process. They should ask themselves, 'What is the next step we should be taking to become better interviewers?' Appraisal is not simply a management tool for determining the strengths and weaknesses of the minister; it should also help the leadership team to discover its own strengths and weaknesses, and in so doing increases the effectiveness of the church's management as a whole.

Outcomes

Individual training and development needs which are identified through the appraisal process should be set in the wider context of the needs for new or changing skills arising from a church's strategic plans for mission. A training analysis provides the basis for the design of the necessary training programmes for the minister and how well he/she will benefit from it.

Whether drawn from individual or corporate appraisal, training and development requirements fall into three broad categories:

- the need for additional knowledge;
- the need for new or higher level skills - the practical or active application of knowledge to particular functions;
- the need for attitudinal change.

Clearly these three elements interact. To achieve developmental objectives, an array of measures will be required, since some forms of development are better suited to one element than another. Reliance on one training model alone (usually the formal training course) will not facilitate all-round improvement.

There is a variety of means to achieving training and development:

- professional qualifications;
- external training courses;
- denominational in-house courses;
- planned work experience;
- mentoring;
- distance learning;
- study visits;
- secondments;
- planned reading programmes;
- participation in inter-church study groups;
- management clubs';
- involvement in the activities of professional bodies or other external organisations.

One aim of appraisal is to stimulate initiative and commitment on the part of the minister and one aspect of training is to encourage the minister to take a large measure of responsibility for his/her own development. The leadership team can provide a working environment which facilitates development, but the minister 'owns' the personal learning process.

The church should consider training and development as being an integral and continuous element in the planning and implementation of the church's plans. Formal appraisal may occur only once a year, but this should be a 'stock-take' within a continuous process and not the only time each year when training and development are considered.

A staff development policy requires clear aims; a rationale for those aims; a co-ordinating mechanism (where the church has a number of members of staff) to help avoid overlaps and to encourage individuals and groups to work together on developments and a definite commitment to a course of action. The development process has two purposes. First it indicates the sequence of events to be pursued either by a minister alone or within small groups, or by the leadership team as a whole; and secondly it reinforces the point that professional development is a long- term process, not a series of unrelated events. It is vital to build the sort of working atmosphere in which professional growth can be encouraged.

Good practice

Appraisal should be undertaken continuously and in a relaxed way; this should enable the church to avoid the resentment that is often felt over the formal annual review. Strengths and weaknesses should be discussed objectively; any criticism should not be obscured by talking around it - it is helpful to get to the point, otherwise it is possible the message may not be clear. Care needs to be taken not to overreact to good or bad points. It is easy but not smart to run out of superlatives!

The minister's performance is complex and is interdependent with that of the leadership team; a bad or good performance may not lie entirely within his or her control. Where difficulties have been identified, there are advantages in outlining the approach most likely to be effective; if the minister does not choose to adopt it, there is nothing to gain in pressing the point.

The leadership team should not become involved in recommending solutions to private or emotional problems - specialised counselling may be needed.

It is important not to save up praise or criticism for the next formal review; issues require attention as they arise. Any criticism that is expressed should be specific; it is helpful to illustrate the points that are being made and, where possible, to indicate a better alternative.

Changes in paperwork for the appraisal should be undertaken if improvements are identified. Above all it should be remembered that the purpose of appraisal is to motivate the appraised.

Issues

A church which makes a positive contribution to the development of its minister is probably characterised by certain organisational features such as problem-seeking rather than problem-solving, and initiatives in which responsibilities are delegated with power to take action. In such a church, the minister and teams will be encouraged to discuss issues openly and share the ownership of both problems and solutions. The leadership team will have encouraged team work and an atmosphere of consistency and trust.

Appraisal within such a church will be seen as an essential element of the development process. It will be non-threatening,

stemming from a clear vision and an expectation that things can always be improved.

On a practical level, appraisal carries costs and resource implications. The collection of reliable and valid information about the professional performance of church staff is labour intensive. Skills training will be required, since interviewing involves many facets: listening, negotiating, target setting, and personal attributes of sensitivity and perceptiveness. Some training will be necessary to raise awareness of the problems likely to be encountered. As a result of the appraisal, training needs must be satisfied and support must be available if goals are to be attained. A scheme will lose credibility if expectations raised during an interview are not met.

Conclusion

Although appraisal can be effective within the development planning cycle of a church, the perceptions of the minister are crucial to the way in which he/she construes the nature of his/her work. This suggests that the lynchpin for the success of any appraisal scheme is the willingness of the individual minister to undertake constant self-evaluation.

Postscript

I have not sought to provide a Biblical justification for current good management practice. Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that there are examples in the life of Jesus which show that he was involved in constant self-appraisal. From the time that he set out his mission in the 'Nazareth manifesto' in Luke 4:16-21 up to and including the Gethsemane experience we can see how Jesus was willing to evaluate the purposes of his mission cf. John 6:15. The incident when Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was (Matt. 16:13-28) has led to a number of rich interpretations; would it be too fanciful to suggest that Jesus was seeking some feedback from his friends in order that he could gauge the impact of his teaching and example? Finally, although we cannot be certain about the content of the times of prayer that Jesus spent with his Father, it is possible that he sought guidance and reassurance for his work and mission. If this is the example that Jesus has set us surely we would do well to be faithful in this aspect of our discipleship.

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APPRAISAL - A CORPORATE RESPONSE

By Alun Brookfield

My wife and I have both been subject to appraisal systems. I work for a large religious charity, she for a housing association. My company has used formal appraisal systems in the past, but they have now fallen into disuse. Mary's company uses a very formal six-monthly appraisal structure, requiring the filling in of lengthy forms on the parts of both worker and manager. These forms are then exchanged and the contents discussed, agreed and signed, along with a list of actions to be taken by both parties.

At my company, a similar system was employed during my first year or so, but it proved unwieldy, especially in an environment which was undergoing (and continues to undergo) constant change. It must not be inferred, however, that no appraisal takes place. On the contrary, the formal system has been replaced by a network of informal meetings between managers and staff. As a result, appraisal is a regular part of everyday life, and is much appreciated by all concerned.

In reflecting on our experiences of appraisal, whether formal or informal, I find there is a number of points to be made, especially in trying to relate them to the process of appraisal for minister.

First, there is no threat or criticism implied in the process. Some of my colleagues reacted strongly against appraisal, especially as we began to face the need to upgrade the skills of our staff. The suggestion that someone might need to increase or improve his or her skills was taken as criticism of performance or an indication that he or she was about to be moved or even made redundant. It is unfortunate and, I suggest, immature to regard any suggestion that improvement is needed, in any of those ways. It really is time